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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3023
INFO RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 5295
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 8799
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 8878
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2054
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 9509
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 1346
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4445
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 8582
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 8864
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 6799
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE 3582
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 8036
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 4177
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3741
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

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DEPT FOR SCA/INS, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: PUNJAB OUTCOME TOO CLOSE TO CALL

REF: NEW DELHI 661

INCLEMENT WEATHER DOES NOT HINDER VOTING

11. (U) On February 13, despite heavy rains an estimated 65-70 percent of Punjab's 10 million member electorate voted in the state's hotly-contested Legislative Assembly election. The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)/BJP coalition and the Congress are vying for political leadership in the state (reftel). Although alcohol consumption is prohibited 48 hours before elections, both parties distributing liquor liberally to villages on the night before the election in a last ditch effort to buy votes. Despite a few minor skirmishes in the morning, election day passed with no significant violence. While urban turnout was light, hurting Congress, rural voters voted enthusiastically in large numbers, often waiting in line for 4-5 hours in pouring rain, benefiting the Akalis.

EXIT POLLS UNRELIABLE

12. (U) Although most exit polls indicated a slim Akali/BJP win, a joint poll conducted by CNN/IBN and the Hindustan Times predicted a tie. However, in such a tight race, exit polling cannot provide a reliable indicator of the outcome. This is the first year that Punjab used electronic voting machines throughout the state. The Punjab Election Commission will release the results on February 27. Though there are 117 seats, only 115 districts voted on February 13. The Election Commission delayed elections in two districts due to violence and concerns that law and order could not be maintained. Should the election prove as close as many pundits predict, the final outcome may not be determined until the votes are tallied in these two districts.

NO CLEAR MANDATE

13. (U) This election is the most competitive ever held in Punjab. We expect both parties to claim victory until the final results are announced. Chief Minister Amarinder Singh has declared that the high voter turnout is indicative of a Congress victory. SAD leader Parkash Singh Badal claimed the same high turnout was a reflection of people's anger against the current government. While the exit polls are not a reliable indicator of who will win, they confirm that the margin of victory will be small. Such a close and competitive race is consistent with our assessment that Punjab's voters are not pleased with Akali or Congress.

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